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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 000195

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DEPT FOR EUR A/S FRIED, EUR DAS BRYZA, AND EUR/CARC

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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR A/S FRIED MEETING WITH PRESIDENT SAAKASHVILI AT WEHRKUNDE

REF: TBILISI 179

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Kosovo and the upcoming parliamentary elections will likely dominate your meeting with President Saakashvili at the Wehrkunde conference. Kosovo is nearly certain to be the first issue on Saakashvili's agenda, as he seeks more information about the timing of an independence declaration and further re-assurance that the West is sending strong signals to Russia not to retaliate by recognizing Abkhazia and/or South Ossetia. On elections, opposition leaders are meeting with Speaker Burjanadze and her team to negotiate the opposition's demands laid forth on January 28. USAID has allocated USD 5.8 million toward election assistance to Georgia in 2008. Areas targeted for improvement this Spring include the election code, training of election officials at all levels and improving ballot counting procedures. Your meeting will be a timely opportunity to reiterate that, given the aftermath of the presidential election, the parliamentary elections offer Saakashvili his best opportunity for the foreseeable future to assure the international community of Georgia's democratic bona fides. The closer the elections are to being truly free and fair, the better for Georgia and its aspirations to join NATO. Saakashvili will also ask for Washington's latest news on the prospects for MAP at Bucharest or later. He may also express concern about Iranian threats resulting from the extradition of an accused Iranian arms dealer from Georgia to the United States. We have told the GOG we will follow its lead on responding to such threats or adverse publicity stemming from the incident. End Summary.

Kosovo

¶2. (C) As we get closer to the Kosovo endgame, Saakashvili's anxiety that Russia will respond to international recognition of Kosovo by recognizing Abkhazia, and perhaps South Ossetia, has only grown. Georgian officials remain divided about whether Russia would actually do it, but Defense Minister Kezerashvili made clear in a recent meeting with DAS Bryza (reftel) that he believes the Russians have promoted the prospect so much that they cannot back down. Russian officials' recent public statements, such as Foreign Minister Lavrov's comment that Russia would not recognize Abkhazia "immediately," have done nothing to reassure the Georgians. Russia may not be alone: new Foreign Minister Bakradze (whom you met last November) told the Ambassador February 4 that the Iranians are now privately threatening to recognize Abkhazia after Georgia's recent (and thus far unpublicized) extradition of an Iranian arms dealer to the U.S. If Russia recognizes Abkhazia, Saakashvili will come under huge domestic pressure to do something to stop the permanent loss of Abkhazia. Pressure will be even greater if recognition is accompanied by a new round of violence involving the ethnic

Georgians in the Gali region. Saakashvili understands the U.S. position on Kosovo and recalls your several conversations on the subject, but he will be eager for more detail on the expected timing, and most of all he will want to see that we are doing all we can to make clear to the Russians that such a step would do serious damage to their relationship with the West.

Opposition

¶3. (U) Behind-the-scenes negotiations continue regarding the coming parliamentary elections, which will likely take place in May. Parliamentary Speaker Nino Burjanadze and Deputy Speaker Mikheil Machavariani are leading the talks with the United National Council of Opposition (UNC). The UNC is also coordinating with (non-members) the New Rightists and Labor parties regarding the negotiations. The opposition factions in Parliament are boycotting all proceedings except the ongoing negotiations and any unforeseen national security crises. At the same time, the opposition is already beginning to fragment, with the Republicans recently deciding to run a separate party list in the parliamentary election.

¶4. (U) On February 5, Conservative party MP and UNC member, Zviad Dzidziguri, announced a new series of public protests to begin on February 7. The protests will include posters showing those who "stole" votes in January and also allow people to sign a petition saying they did not vote for Saakashvili. Burjanadze responded publicly that the government is negotiating with the opposition and "there is no need for protests now." Nevertheless, Saakashvili must support Burjanadze and take a flexible approach to dealing

TBILISI 00000195 002 OF 002

with the opposition.

Parliamentary Elections

¶5. (C) USAID has allocated USD 5.8 million for election assistance to Georgia in 2008. USG initiatives to improve the election process extend the commitments undertaken for the presidential election. Continuing efforts focus on three areas.

¶6. (C) First, the election code needs to be simplified and finalized well in advance of the election. Time to revise it completely does not exist prior to Election Day. However, it currently is so broadly written as to make any claims of malfeasance or fraud impossible to prove. Similarly, the code must be approved in final form no less than one month prior to the election. Waiting longer will not allow time for proper training of officials. The short lead time before the presidential elections led to multiple problems.

¶7. (C) Second, election commission officials must be better trained at all levels, from the Central Election Commission down to the precincts. A key component of this is introducing more transparency and oversight of the District Election Commissions (DEC). Many irregularities and complaints in the presidential election revolved around the opaque DECs. A second component is to remove political parties, especially the National Movement, from the training process.

¶8. (C) Counting procedures must be improved. The higher level of transparency in the election process that Saakashvili introduced, such as the display of precinct protocols on the CEC website, was a tremendous step forward. However, this was in itself not enough. Precinct Election Commissions must be able to count the votes and report results directly to the CEC in a straightforward manner. DECs should not be involved in vote tabulation.

¶9. (C) The closer the elections are to being truly free and fair, the better for Georgia. The aftermath of the presidential election revealed numerous problems with the CEC. Most seriously, it exposed a low level of concern by the government about ensuring the post-election process is as secure as the ballot box itself. The upcoming parliamentary election offers Saakashvili his best opportunity in the foreseeable future to reassure a somewhat skeptical international community that Georgia is truly embracing Western values and democracy.

Ardebili Case

¶10. (C) Saakashvili may express concern about the Iranian reaction to the arrest and extradition to the United States of an Iranian arms dealer, Ardebili. The Iranians have made veiled threats against Georgian interests in Iran, including its Embassy there. The GOG is worried about possible attacks against Georgian troops in Iraq and on the pipelines or other infrastructure in Georgia. Iran is unlikely to supply natural gas to Georgia in an emergency, as occurred in 2006. We have told the GOG that we will not take any steps to counter Iran's threats or any adverse publicity unless Georgia asks us to do so. Even if Iran itself makes the incident public, the U.S. and Georgia may find it best to remain mute.

TEFFT